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Res. No. 16

Resolution declaring March 14 annually as Innocent 11 Remembrance Day in the City of New York in honor of those who were murdered by an anti-Italian mob in New Orleans in 1891

By Council Members Ariola, Paladino, Carr, Louis and Salaam

Whereas, Between 1880 and 1930, more than 2,500 people were lynched at the hands of bigoted vigilante mobs in the South in the United States (U.S.), with most of those victims being Black men, but with some being Italian, Chinese, or Jewish; and

Whereas, Journalist G.L. Godkin noted in 1893 that "seven-eighths of every lynching [party] is composed of pure, sporting mob, which goes…for the gratification of the lowest and most degraded instincts of humanity"; and

Whereas, The lynching of 11 members of the Italian-American and Italian immigrant community in New Orleans on March 14, 1891, resulted from the murder of Police Chief David Hennessy, who, as he lay dying, whispered an anti-Italian slur indicating that those of Italian heritage had shot him; and

Whereas, At the time of the murder, New Orleans was home to many Italian Americans and Italian immigrants-more than any other Southern state-who had been coming to New Orleans for almost a century; and

Whereas, In spite of their long history in New Orleans, many Italian Americans and Italian immigrants were discriminatorily viewed as suspicious and related to the Mafia, and their customs were looked down on by New Orleanians as foreign and dangerous; and

Whereas, After Hennessy's murder, hundreds of presumably innocent Italian Americans and Italian immigrants were rounded up, and some were imprisoned and tried; and

Whereas, The trials of six imprisoned men ended in not guilty verdicts, and the trials of three more

ended in mistrials, which led to angry public sentiment; and

Whereas, The *Daily States* newspaper wrote in response to the verdicts, "Rise, people of New Orleans…[a]lien hands of oath-bound assassins have set the blot of a martyr's blood upon your vaunted civilization"; and

Whereas, After a rally of thousands of New Orleanians protested the verdicts, a group of armed men broke into the prison and pulled out those who had been tried as well as others; and

Whereas, After hundreds of bullets were fired, the mutilated bodies of 11 Italian-American and Italian immigrant men were hanged or torn apart by the lynch mob; and

Whereas, The men who lost their lives on March 14, 1891, were Antonio Bagnetto (tried and acquitted), James Caruso (never tried), Loreto Comitis (never tried), Rocco Geraci (never tried), Joseph Macheca (tried and acquitted), Antonio Marchesi (tried and acquitted), Pietro Monasterio (mistrial), Emmanuele Polizi (mistrial), Frank Romero (never tried), Antonio Scaffidi (mistrial), and Charles Traina (never tried); and

Whereas, Two days after the lynch mob acted, *The New York Times* wrote that "[t]hese sneaking and cowardly Sicilians, the descendants of bandits and assassins, who have transported to this country the lawless passions, the cut-throat practices, and the oath-bound societies of their native country, are to us a pest without mitigation" and that "[t]hese men of the Mafia killed Chief Hennessy in circumstances of peculiar atrocity"; and

Whereas, *The New York Times* further noted that "[l]ynch law was the only course open to the people of New Orleans to stay the issue of a new license to the Mafia to continue its bloody practices"; and

Whereas, The lynch mob, which was made up of well-known New Orleanians, including future mayors and governors, was not punished after a grand jury declared that none of the members of the mob could be identified; and

Whereas, While the true identities of Hennessy's assassins were never established, an unproved Mafia connection led to anti-Italian sentiment for a very long time; and

Whereas, The lynching of those who came to be known as the "Innocent 11" caused a rift in U.S.-Italian diplomatic relations; and

Whereas, The following year, U.S. President Benjamin Harrison held the first U.S. Columbus Day celebration to help smooth relations between the two countries; and

Whereas, The Columbus Circle monument in New York City (NYC) was erected that same year in a gesture of good will to the Italian-American community, which helped make amends for the discrimination Italian Americans and Italian immigrants had faced; and

Whereas, There are currently hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers of Italian heritage who are living in NYC's five boroughs and contributing to all facets of NYC's economic, cultural, civic, and political life; and

Whereas, The story of the Innocent 11 serves as a sorrowful and important reminder of the baseless violence and injustice that have come from racism, religious intolerance, and xenophobia in many times and places in American history; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Council of the City of New York declares March 14 annually as Innocent 11 Remembrance Day in the City of New York in honor of those who were murdered by an anti-Italian mob in New Orleans in 1891.

RHP
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